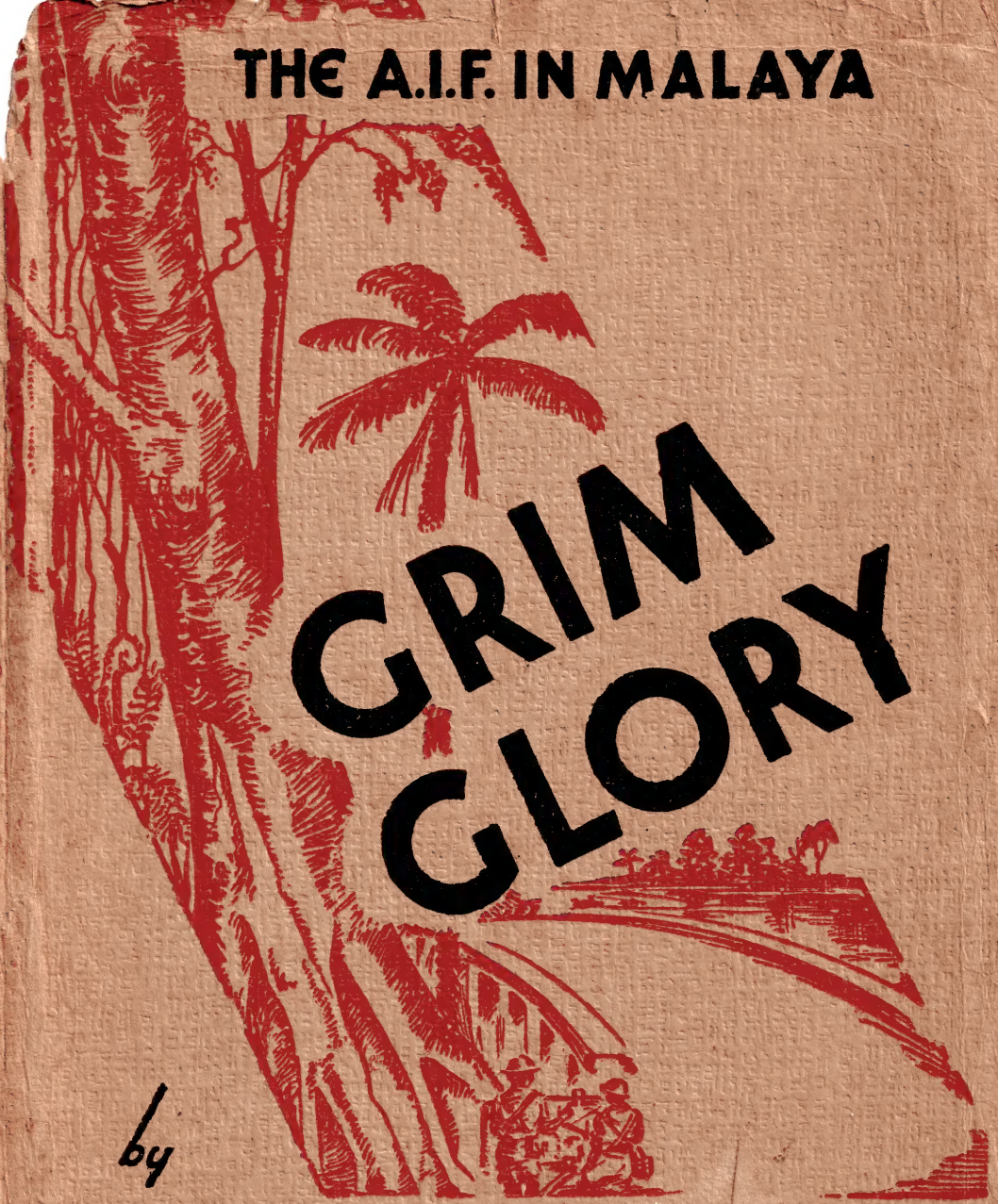
THE A.I.F. IN MALAYA



# GRIM GLORY

by

**GILBERT MANT**

*with a foreword by*

**LIEUT. GENERAL H. GORDON BENNETT**

*C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., V.D.*

2/-

NORMAN T. HOPE

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*Gilbert Mant*

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With a Foreword by Lieut.-General H. Gordon Bennett,
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# *Dedication*

TO MY COBBER, JOHN CHARLES RESCORL,
AND THE REST OF 2/19th, WHEREVER THEY
MAY BE.

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# *Foreword*

*By Lieut.-General H. GORDON BENNETT, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., V.D.*

THE story of the battle at Bakri and Parit Sulong is more than the story of a battle between a small force of under 2,000 fighting Australians and the 1st Japanese Guards Division—in which the Australians held the enemy at bay for five long important days. It is the story of indomitable courage, grim determination and unusual endurance.

These men went into battle, breathing the words, "No quarter given or asked for." Most of them fought to the death. Not once in their many wireless messages to A.I.F. Headquarters, did they ask for help or suggest surrender. And when the tired and battered remnants of this small band returned to our lines, they hurriedly reorganised and went back into battle with the determination to destroy their foe.

The story tells of fine leadership and exemplary courage of their Commander, Lieut.-Colonel C. G. W. Anderson, V.C., M.C., in civil life a grazier from Koorawatha, near Young, New South Wales; of a strong offensive spirit in all ranks, who, though depleted in numbers, attacked and counter-attacked over and over again, forcing their way through miles of stoutly defended road blocks; of human endurance, especially among the wounded who struggled past the Japanese lines through miles of jungle and swamp back to our lines.

In this book, Gilbert Mant has accurately described the battle and has written a story that every Australian should read.

# *Author's Preface*

THIS little book, a tribute to courage, is in no way intended to tell the "Truth About Malaya" or to trace a detailed history of that ill-fated campaign. Books on this subject will be legion and illuminating after the war, and there will be plenty of evidence offered at the inquest.

I have tried to tell in simple words a story of simple heroism performed by two Australian infantry battalions and troops attached to them.

It was never intended to be published in its present form; I simply set down on paper the story of Parit Sulong while the events were still fresh in my mind in preparation for a full history after the war of 2/19th Battalion, with whom I served for 14 months.

If the deeds of 2/19th are stressed overmuch, it is only because of this reason. Nothing can steal the glory of 2/29th Battalion and other Australian troops in this action, but unfortunately I have no detailed knowledge of them.

My thanks are due to Reuters, whose War Correspondent I was during the Malayan Campaign, for giving a blessing to this book. Any views of a controversial nature are, of course, my own and not Reuters.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE END AND THE BEGINNING.

THE trucks with the badly wounded men inside were pulled into the side of the road so that the Japanese tanks could go through unimpeded.

This was the hardest moment of all—leaving the wounded behind. A young Australian officer, himself with a shrapnel wound in his thigh, limped along the line of trucks. He had two clean white towels with him and the last of the morphia tablets. These he distributed to those who were suffering the most.

He said huskily, "Good-bye, old man," to a fellow officer, but by the time he had come to the last truck he could not speak at all.

The young officer found 31 "walking wounded" willing to make the last desperate bid for safety before the Japanese tanks rumbled down the road. The unwounded remnants of the two battalions, and attached troops, already had left in deployed formation for that miraculous gap in the ring of Japanese besiegers.

For four days and nights they had fought their way along the Bakri-Yong Peng road against overwhelming numbers of the enemy who surrounded them on every side. Perhaps, 1,800 strong at the beginning, they had fought the cream of the Japanese invading army in Malaya. Against them was most certainly the crack 1st Imperial Guards Division, probably 15,000 strong, and possibly other Japanese storm troops.

At cruel cost to themselves they had saved the British left flank in Malaya at a critical period and made possible the extrication of our main army in the centre. Of them General Gordon Bennett was to say: "No more astounding effort has been made in this war or the last war. The Australians were in a hopeless position, but there was no thought or mention of surrender. They were as full of fight at the end as they were in the beginning. Such devotion to duty would be difficult to surpass."

During those incredible four days and nights they had undergone continuous artillery and mortar fire from the ground; vicious dive-bombing and machine-gunning from the air. They had smashed their way through miles of road blocks; fought at one stage with axes like crusaders of old; crushed Japanese tank assaults at pointblank range; made irresistible bayonet charges singing "Waltzin' Matilda."

Food, water and morphia running low, by the third day they were being called the "doomed battalions." But you cannot doom gallantry or glory. They fought on.

And then on the fourth day they came to the bridge at Parit Sulong. They had done the impossible. Much of their equipment was still intact — the trucks, the Bren gun carriers, the guns. Now they were only a few miles from the British lines, and there was new hope in the tired sunken eyes of the battered but unconquerable band of Australians.

The bridge at Parit Sulong, when they had started on the long road home, had been in British hands. They had no reason to doubt that it had changed hands.

And so the end had come. The bridge at Parit Sulong with its murderous ambush of Japanese machine-guns, its impregnable barricades. The terrible farewell to mortally wounded comrades in the trucks . . . and the break for safety through the gap.

One of the men left behind, lying in a truck with a shattered leg, was thinking back as he waited for the Japanese to come: "It's a long way back to that day at Walgrove when the old battalion was formed. . . ."

* * *

It was indeed a long way back to that cold winter's morning in July, 1940, when 22nd Australian Infantry Brigade came into being at Walgrove, New South Wales.

They shuffled along in the manner of semi-raw recruits from the wing of militia battalions and formed up on the rise overlooking the stone building so aptly described on ordnance maps as a "ruin."

Soon those who elected to join 2/19th Battalion were caught in the complicated machinery of "forming a battalion." The came, some from the city, but chiefly from the Riverina district of New South Wales. They talked of Wagga, Cootamundra, Gundagai, Leeton, Griffith. They were the real country breed. They had the puckered-up look of the Australian bushman in their steady eyes, in their loping walk, in their bronzed skins. Many of them were born to the rifle, to snap-shooting against kangaroos—it was to stand them in good stead later on.

They had all enlisted just after the fall of France. There were many men with four-figure incomes in civil life now proudly earning their 6/- a day. There were barristers, bank clerks, journalists, schoolmasters, rubbing shoulders with navvies, stockmen, prize-fighters, bricklayers and unemployed labourers. There was a large proportion of married men with children. They were all in it because they thought it was the right thing to do. They were the salt of the earth. They were at home with their C.O., a Cootamundra doctor in private life, Colonel Duncan Maxwell. Their 2/I.C. was Major C. G. W. Anderson. We shall hear more of Maxwell and Anderson.

So 2/19th was born, pledged to uphold the traditions of the "Fighting Nineteenth" of the first A.I.F. No veteran from Gallipoli and France of the old 19th can doubt how well that tradition was upheld, after reading this story. They lined up in countless queues for palliasses, uniforms, hats, rifles. Uproariously they shouted "YOU'LL BE SORRY!" as new detachments came in from training camps, including a New Guinea contingent of eight. Life under canvas. "Giggle suits" (those shapeless khaki training slacks and jackets). The "Bull Ring." Round and round until they were giddy with new knowledge. Machine-gun stoppages. Lunging at each other with bayonets. Squad drill. Rifle exercises. More squad drill. They cursed the mechanics of infantry training, but they realised dimly later that it had taught them the co-ordination of mind and muscle.

Then the move to the Ingleburn huts and the feeling that they were getting out of their swaddling clothes. They were "learning to crawl," as the C.O. put it. More Bull Rings. Longer route marches along hot, dusty roads, with "Piccolo Pete" setting the pace on his penny whistle. The excruciating growing-pains of a band and the wail of bag-pipes. The first bivouac. The joyous sensation of conquering Mount Everest as the Weakest Member reached the summit of Leppington with a full pack for the first time. A long gruelling bivouac around Narellan and back. Company drill. More Bull Rings for luck. The first real "stunt" with blank cartridges and smoke bombs. Slowly but surely they were getting the "feel" of things. That memorable march through Sydney when they surprised even themselves by the discipline and precision of their marching. Although they said it themselves, it would be a long time before Sydney saw Australian troops march again as 22nd Brigade marched that day.

They moved to Bathurst, cheered and greeted from innumerable houses as the special trains climbed the Blue Mountains. The 2/19th Battalion truly "found itself" at Bathurst. There was a sudden stirring feeling one Sunday morning at church parade that it was a battalion at last. The men, as they swung behind the band, seemed to have a new spring in their stride, a pride in their bearing, a supreme confidence in themselves, their mates and the battalion. Now the bivouacs came thick and fast. Mock battles over the brown hills and down by Campbell's River, with the carriers charging recklessly over obstacles. The digging of a complete trench system and the first Brigade "stunt" ever carried out in Australia, and pronounced a conspicuous success.

After a while they reckoned they had learnt as much as they would learn in Australia. They grew impatient for the overseas adventure. Rumours of early embarkation seemed confirmed when identification discs and sea bags were issued. The Latrine Wireless tipped Egypt, Darwin, Iraq, India, England, West Africa, Abyssinia—and the delightful suggestion of a goodwill tour to America. Tropical shorts (they had another blasphemous name for them later on) appeared and—heaven knows how it leaked out—the word

Singapore was on every tongue. Then it was good-bye to Bathurst and fine Bathurst friends. Before they could catch their breaths almost, they were aboard their anonymous luxury liner with a noisy flotilla of launches to bid them farewell. . . . .

The voyage. The stifling blackouts with closed portholes at night. The blessed sunshine on the boat deck. Bull Rings on board ship. Boxing tournaments. Lectures on tropical diseases (and one disease not peculiar to the tropics). Lectures on the importance of maintaining "British prestige" in foreign places. Bedlam in the wet canteens at night. Boat drill with lifebelts. The false German broadcast which "sank" them somewhere or other. And then the gradual approach of the tropics and a sullen sort of heat from the sun.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MALAYA IN PEACETIME.

ONE morning on 18th February, 1941, the 6,000 odd "passengers" on the anonymous liner crowded the decks as a woodlined coastline appeared. Ahead of them was a slim grey British escorting cruiser, and, as the great liner slipped up the narrow straits, it was joined by a slimmer patrol vessel manned by brown-skinned Malays.

It was a great moment when the liner edged into the mighty Singapore (Ichabod) Naval Base. This was a great occasion, not only for the first Australian troops ever to reach Malaya, but also for Singapore itself. A British regimental band was there on the wharf. The Governor of the Straits Settlements, Sir Shenton Thomas, was there. The G.O.C. Malaya Command, General Bond, was there. And sundry Big Wigs. The Australians had fun and games throwing down pennies to the coolies on the wharf. When they saw the Governor and the Big Wigs, the Australians couldn't resist throwing down pennies to them also. The Big Wigs took it in good part. They smiled. It was a good story for the newspapers, especially the American newspapers, which expect Australians to do that sort of thing. That same wharf was to have different things thrown on it later on.

(News cabled to Australia about this time makes curious reading now. Here are some examples:

> "Batavia Daily News": "Singapore could hold out against a simultaneous land and sea attack for a year. Therefore we can see no direct danger for Singapore if the Japanese in despair, act against the Netherlands East Indies."
>
> "Singapore Straits Times": "As to the danger of an air attack, China's small Air Force and few guns do not provide a comparison as the Japanese airmen will not find such conditions if they attack this country. They will learn the real meaning of aerial combat long before sighting our shores and, if an odd one got through, he would be warmly welcomed."
>
> "Sydney Sun": "Washington.—United States naval experts declare that Singapore is well-nigh invincible and could only be starved out by a blockade. They believe Japan could not capture Singapore without very heavy losses, even if there was not a single British battleship in the vicinity.")

The troops were disembarked at various times during the day and night. Laden down like packhorses, the infantry battalions staggered on their "sea legs" a quarter of a mile to the narrow gauge F.M.S. railway trains. At first the vivid green of the countryside fairly dazzled their eyes as the trains slid through paddocks, padi fields, rubber estates and the jungles.

The 2/19th Battalion was allotted to Seremban, picturesque capital of the State of Negri Sembilan. Thanks to Japanese radio propaganda about the "terrible Australians," the local reception was somewhat chilly at first. Some of the Chinese shopkeepers boarded up their shops. Hardly a woman ventured into the streets for at least a week. Rape, murder and loot were to be expected from these terrible Australians. These ugly stories were soon dispelled by the quiet behaviour of the A.I.F. Soon women came timidly into the open, their virtue inviolate. Soon 2/19th Battalion lines were swarming with cocoa-brown Malay youngsters with wide eyes and flashing white teeth. They bartered words in Malay for Australian postage stamps. The children spoke perfect English themselves, a tribute to the fine English schools in Malaya. They were jolly children, solemn one moment, then breaking into infectious merriment. Within a few weeks the Australians were firm friends with Malays, Chinese and Indians.

With 2/19th Battalion at Seremban, and 2/18th and 2/10th Battalions theoretically in reserve 25 miles away at Port Dickson, famous beauty spot on the shores of the Strait of Malacca, training now began in earnest. In many respects the Australians were raw recruits again. They had to learn elementary lessons in a strange terrain and a strange climate. The Malayan jungle was a different proposition to the bleak bare hills of Ingleburn and Bathurst. A nose for direction, with which so many of the Riverina bushmen had been born, was likely to be put out of joint in the dense forests with their jigsaw puzzle of narrow tracks.

The jungle was the jungle of Hollywood, a "green hell," as the newspaper cliche has it so often. Anyone going into a jungle for the first time was familiar with it through reading stories about "Darkest Africa." It was exactly like that. A monstrously dense expanse of trees and undergrowth. The little trees, straight and as tightly packed as match-sticks, fought for a place in the sunlight against the giant cedars hundreds of feet above. Great vines, some as thick as ship's ropes, laced the trees together. It was the survival of the fittest in the jungle, for man, beast and vegetation alike. There was a silence, too; the unearthly silence of a great leafy cathedral. And yet it wasn't a silence at all, but really a great stillness. There were noises. The chatter of monkeys. A perceptible crash as a leaf fell to the ground. The "hoot-hoot" of a strange tropical bird. The tiny squeak of a jungle animal. Rustlings and whisperings that could not be identified. But the great stillness dominated. The steamy, sweaty smell of the jungle arose everywhere. It was dark and dank "inside." Only occasional shafts of sunlight splashed and dappled down through the tangle of trees and vines.

It was a hard school the Australian learnt in. Lack of green vegetables and excessive sweating was largely responsible for a crop of worrying skin complaints. Nearly all of them had Prickly Heat, Tinea and Dhoby's Itch, the last-named an exasperating itch in the nether regions apparently from germs carried in clothes after severe man-handling by native laundrymen. The Australians sweated and toiled and

swore in the jungle and the hilly rubber country. Bivouacs meant sleeping under mosquito nets and wondering whether one would roll over into a King Cobra during the night. They dragged through steamy, stinking swamps, and cursed as they got entangled in labyrinthine vines and creepers on rubber estates. Leeches, scorpions, snakes, mosquitoes—they suffered them all, but not in silence. They "saw red" when well-meaning folk wanted to know if they were "having a nice holiday."

Some day proper recognition will be given to the foresight and realism of red-haired, pugnacious Major-General (now Lieut-General) H. Gordon Bennett, under whose direction the various Australian commanders at once set to work to train their men for jungle warfare. It meant, in many ways, revolutionary changes in the training the battalions had received in Australia.

The 2/19th Battalion was especially fortunate in having Colonel Maxwell and Major Anderson as No. 1 and No. 2. Maxwell, a giant of a man, was known naturally enough as "Tiny" Maxwell, and, for his size, had extraordinary physique and stamina. His military career had been as unusual as it had been distinguished. By profession a physician and surgeon, he served in the 1914-18 war as a front-line soldier, trooper, sniper, N.C.O., and lastly as officer, winning the Military Cross and several mentions in despatches. The war over he returned to the practice of medicine and became one of the best-known doctors in southern New South Wales. On the outbreak of war he offered himself again for military service, characteristically seeking service, not with a medical unit in which he would readily have gained high rank, but with an infantry battalion. Later on Maxwell was to make another characteristic gesture in the last tragic days of Singapore. He sought, and got, General Bennett's permission to stay behind in one of Singapore's military hospitals where doctors were desperately needed.

Anderson, who was to win the Victoria Cross on the road to Parit Sulong, was another remarkable character. An Englishman, he was born at Cape Town, South Africa, in 1897. In the last war he served with the King's African

Rifles and was awarded the Military Cross in the East African campaign. He was a master of jungle warfare, and a big-game hunter whose fame was known throughout Africa. Jungle lore and military strategy and tactics were his hobbies. He met and married an Australian girl in South Africa, and began sheep-farming near Young, New South Wales, in 1937. As soon as the war broke out he joined up again. Anderson was a compact, sturdily-built man, who wore glasses over his keen penetrating eyes. He was a fast, precise, fluent talker with a shrewd sense of humour. In the Malayan jungle he was in his element. He predicted with uncanny foreknowledge the tactics the Japanese would use if they invaded Malaya. He lectured the men, in effect, "The jungle will frighten you at first. Don't let it. There are simply no terrors in a jungle if you know it. You have got to learn the jungles here. You must think you are on safari stalking wild animals. You have got to learn to be Boy Scouts again. You must learn the jungle tracks intimately. You must learn stealth and silence and how to find your way about in the dark. You must learn to be as cunning as the wild animals themselves. You must learn to live on as little food as possible and to do without water for long periods. Japan has crack troops trained in jungle warfare for years. Do not underestimate them. Through owning tin mines and rubber estates — curiously enough in strategical parts of Malaya — the Japanese have detailed plans and knowledge of the country. They will probably try to sneak round behind our rear and flanks and catch us unawares. But, remember, two can play at that game. *We must learn to stalk the Japanese like animals.*

He and Maxwell drummed in the lesson over and over again. They drummed in also the importance of fire control; to shoot only when the shot would take effect. The lesson was so well learnt that it played a decisive part in the heroic battle of Muar River. The same thing was happening in other Australian units. Intelligence Sections spent weeks in the A.I.F.'s war station, in the Mersing area of the east coast, familiarising themselves with the dense jungle areas and mapping hundreds of narrow tracks, watercourses, roads and other features, some of them never mapped before.

The months passed, and the Japanese threat seemed to recede further and further into the limbo of speculative things The polite little Japanese hairdressers in every Malayan town cut the hair of the Australian soldiers and asked innumerable questions. The eager little Japanese photographers canvassed to develop films taken by the soldiers. The slant-eyed little Japanese prostitutes in the hotels looked for Australian customers.

Boredom set in amongst the Australians who did not take kindly to what they called "garrison duties." They wanted to be fighting with their brother divisions in the Middle East. Scores of applications were made for transfer to units outside Malaya. Satirical notices began to appear outside tents and atop huts: "MENZIES' GLAMOUR BOYS," "WE CAME HERE FOR GLORY AND ALL WE GOT WAS GLAMOUR," "WHEN DO WE FIGHT?" and so on.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE TUAN BESARS.

MUCH has been written, and much will be written, about the European population of Malaya before and during the Pacific war. This population, amounting to about 30,000, included a large number of Scots, Australians and New Zealanders, chiefly engaged in rubber planting and tin mining.

Tribute should be paid at once to the British and Dominion women in various parts of Malaya who so quickly provided canteens for the Australian soldiers when they reached the country, and gave up so much of their time to operating them. Notable examples were the Anzac Club in Singapore, which a gallant band of women kept going until the Japanese invaders were actually on Singapore Island, and the Anzac Club at Kuala Lumpur. It should be mentioned, however, that no voluntary effort was made before the arrival of the Australians to make easier the lives of British garrison troops, some of whom had been in Malaya for four years. The British Tommies were sore about this preferential treatment to the A.I.F., and rightly so. A prophet as lowly as a British private soldier had very little honour amongst his own people in Malaya in pre-war days.

To understand the background of the "Tuan Besars" ("Big Shots" in other words) of British Malaya, it is necessary to recognise that Malaya, in common with other British

possessions in the Far East, was an exploited country. It was exploited commercially in the same way as the Dutch exploited Java, or the Australians exploited New Guinea.

To be sure, in Malaya, as in Java, the coming of the European exploiters brought with it material benefits. Malaya had good main roads, a fine railway system, good schools, and administrative buildings. The lot of the Malay had improved, but it is doubtful whether he was intrinsically any happier than in the days when he lived in his kampong and was a fierce fighting man.

The British dominated the country commercially and politically, and the native inhabitants were the subject races. Exaggerated stories have been told that all Malays and Tamils in Malaya were fifth-columnists and traitors when war did break out. This was not borne out by facts, although there were many cases of treachery. Whereas in Burma the politically discontented Burmese actually bore arms against the British, the Malays in Malaya, of whom there were over 2,000,000, as a race maintained a disinterested neutrality. The truth of the matter is that the native races were completely indifferent regarding the Allied cause. Without actively opposing it, they had little cause to love the British regime of the type Malaya enjoyed, and felt that if Japan won, it would mean merely a change of masters. They were taught in the English schools that Britain was a benevolent master and was there to protect against aggression. Their loyalty, if it ever really existed, suffered a rude shock when war broke out. In many cases they were left to fend for themselves.

The Chinese, of whom there were more than 2,350,000 in Malaya, were on a different footing. The merchant class had practically a commercial stranglehold in various Malayan towns and cities, and had considerable investments at stake. It was this fact and the fact that China was already at war with Japan, rather than any particular love for the British, that ranged the Chinese so solidly on the British side. Time and time again Chinese of all classes took great risks in aiding British and Australian soldiers who were cut off from their units by the Japanese. And yet the Chinese had grievances.

For instance, the Chinese manager of a big British store in a certain town was paid less than his European clerk, presumably because he was a Chinese. This was called upholding "British prestige."

Australian private soldiers were quickly aware of the undercurrent of hostility against the British in Malaya. One of the reasons which made this apparent to them was that, as private soldiers, they were barred from European clubs in Malaya, such as the Selangor ("Spotted Dog") Club at Kuala Lumpur and the Sungei Ujong Club at Seremban. In some cases the question of admitting Other Ranks was put to a vote and defeated. It is only fair to the clubs to say that the Australian military authorities in Malaya made it fairly plain that they were opposed to the principle. From the disciplinary point of view, this was understandable enough, but it led to some quaint situations. For instance, the volunteer A.I.F. being what it is, there were many privates who were respected members of exclusive Australian clubs, and they carried letters of introduction to the secretaries of affiliated clubs in Malaya.

They were refused admittance because of their military rank, in the same way as they were refused admittance to Raffles Hotel in Singapore. In Australia at this time such well-known clubs as the Royal Sydney Golf Club, the Union Club and others were extending hospitality to Malayan judges and civil servants (privates in the Malayan V.D.C.) who were members of affiliated Malayan clubs. The Australian clubs were angry and it was only the outbreak of war with Japan, when clubs did not matter very much anyhow, that stopped "retaliatory" measures.

In all parts of Malaya the cultured class of Indians and Chinese had first-class clubs of their own and many Australian private soldiers soon found that here they were indeed welcome. Soon the Australians were their friends, and gained their confidence. It was apparent, especially amongst the educated Indians, that they and the Chinese were treated as distinct "outsiders" by the Europeans. They were socially snubbed, and had been for years. Some of them were graduates from Oxford and Cambridge, and the snubs rankled. It

seemed to them that their membership of the British Commonwealth of Nations was so much hypocrisy. It was the stirrings of national consciousness and the war brought it to the surface. The Australians, raw in the intricacies of Imperialism, could not but feel sympathy for them.

*No more biting commentary on the European outlook in Malaya can be given than to mention that Australian soldiers, banned from their own clubs, were accused of "lowering British prestige" by mixing sc intimately with the Indians and Chinese in their clubs.*

Blame it on the climate, the life they were forced to lead —but unquestionably there was an acute class consciousness and a moral flabbiness amongst the Europeans in Malaya. Here snobbishness ruled supreme. A British Resident was an official and social god. The "Tuan Besars" were minor gods, with many worshippers. The story goes in Malaya that Noel Coward's "Mad Dogs and Englishmen," that cruel satire on the white man in the East, was inspired after a Singapore hostess had rebuked him for some inconsequential social misdemeanour.

This war has proved beyond much doubt that the White Man's prestige in the Far East was never founded on racial prestige, but simply on fear. The crumbling of native support in Malaya came when the strength of British arms began to totter.

What has to be said about the European civil servant, the rubber and tin man in Malaya, should not be interpreted as an "attack" on them. They were all Michael Arlen's "charming people," and, through lack of official guidance, the events after the outbreak of war with Japan left them in a rather pathetic daze. They saw their whole world collapsing around them; not only material bomb damage, but spiritual damage. Many of them lost everything they possessed. The whole thing to them was fantastically unreal. They walked around, bewildered, unable to understand the catastrophe.

For years they had enjoyed a despotic and arrogant social rule. They had paid no income tax. They had lived in delightful bungalows with an abundance of native servants.

Most families were able to support a syce (chauffeur), cook, house boy, amah (nurse), gardener and perhaps others. Many women going to Malaya for the first time had wanted to lead practical lives in their new homes. But they found, for instance, that Chinese cooks resented their presence in the kitchen; it was a loss of "face." Inevitably they drifted into the easy life of the tropics. Many women found that they had literally nothing to do during the daytime.

Life on rubber plantations was not exactly strenuous. A manager worked early in the morning and again late in the afternoon overseeing his colony of Tamil labourers. Immediately after luncheon all Europeans took their afternoon siesta until about 4 p.m.; it was a solemn rite. The equatorial climate was enervating; the siesta was regarded as absolutely necessary from the health point of view. And so was the regular drinking of whisky and gin. At night European life revolved around the clubs. There was a great deal of drinking and a great deal of gossip and scandal.

It is impossible to escape the conclusion that the Europeans in Malaya, as well as in other parts of the Far East, led preposterously spoilt, artificial existences. Life was a terrible round of leisured boredom. They lived in an outdated atmosphere of Kipling, and nobody was wise enough to see the coming of the tragedy that was to engulf them. Worst of all, the climate was considered unsuitable for children, so that when they were about 8 years old they had to be sent abroad to school. This enforced separation robbed many Malayan homes of a normal family life. It flung Europeans more and more into the clubs, and it created moral looseness.

Women did not have enough with which to occupy their minds. It inevitably bred in them an attitude of tid'apa ("it doesn't matter"). Malaya suffered acutely from tid-apathy. It wasn't the people's fault; it was simply force of circumstances; but it did not help to stabilise matters when Malaya was falling to pieces. When the blow fell there were fine examples of courage and self-sacrifice by men and women alike. But underlying it all was a feeling of helplessness, a

complete inability to understand why the native races were so indifferent to the fate of the Europeans.

This was the civil background to the Malayan tragedy. It is too early to apportion blame for the lack of direction from higher quarters. Anyone who knows the story can only feel unutterably sorry for the victims of it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## THE ONSLAUGHT

EARLY in December the blow fell in Malaya, as it fell at Pearl Harbour and in the Philippines. The Japanese swiftly occupied Thailand; pounced on Kota Bahru in the north-east corner of Malaya; swept down from Singgora in Thailand into Kedah and towards the strategically important and lovely island of Penang. In Kedah the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders met the first shock of the onslaught. One company of Argylls and an A.I.F. transport unit were actually inside Thailand the day after war broke out. On the previous day, it was stated, this company of Argylls had stood-to on the Kedah-Thailand border with orders to proceed to Singgora, but the Japanese were one jump ahead and had already occupied this vital railway junction. There have been tales of Foreign Office political caution about this move into Thailand; history will throw further light on it.

On 9th of December, Japanese reconnaissance planes flew over Penang. On the following day the Japanese launched their first big aerial blitz. The town, docks and Chinatown were mercilessly bombed. When the full story of Penang can be told, it will provide the sorriest chapter of the whole Malayan campaign. Evacuation apparently was decided upon, as a military necessity, from the first bombing. Hardly a shot was fired in defence of the island, which commanded the northern end of Malacca Strait and the sea and air lanes to

India, and the Middle East. On 11th December Penang was bombed and machine-gunned again. On 13th December there was another bombing. This time three Brewster Buffalo fighters went up to tackle the Japanese. One returned.

History again will give judgment on stories of the evacuation; of private motor cars belonging to mining officials, golf sticks, tennis rackets taking up valuable space of the evacuation ships. The British still maintained the sanctity of private property; they had not yet learnt the Russian "scorched earth" policy. At Penang huge stores of rice and other foodstuffs were left behind, ostensibly to feed the Chinese, Indians and Malays for whom there was no room an the evacuation ships. Only the valves were destroyed in the Penang radio station, one of the most powerful in the Far East. (The Japanese had it working within a few days, pumping out propaganda throughout the campaign.) Worst of all, no effort whatever was made to destroy the small boats that cluttered up Eastern Harbour with a forest of spars. Sampans, tonkangs, ferries, barges, they were all left intact. These vessels later on helped to seal the doom of Malaya.

The great withdrawal began down the main north-south road, lifeline of Malaya. Soon the Japanese had complete mastery of the air. Our Buffalo fighters had no chance against the faster, more heavily-armed Japanese Navy O (known in Australia as Zeros). Prodigies of courage were performed by our fighter pilots who, with stocial disregard of odds, took up their crates and gave battle to an immensely superior enemy.

Meanwhile came staggering news of the destruction of the Prince of Wales and Repulse by Japanese dive-bombers. No single event rocked the morale of Malaya more than the loss of these fine ships through lack of aerial protection. It is worth noting here that the Japanese made a chivalrous gesture in allowing our destroyers to rescue the survivors without aerial interference.

And what of the British and Indian troops? Ignorant stories that there was no fighting in Malaya are current. Time

will not dim the glory of the Argylls, the Gurkhas, the East Surreys, the Leicesters, the Manchesters, the Hyderabads and the Punjabis, who fought their way mile by mile down the peninsula. The Argylls, grand fighting men, always with the pertinacious A.I.F. 2/3 Reserve Motor Transport unit in attendance, reached Singapore Island less than 100 strong. Malaya can go on their battle honours without shame, with pride in their achievement.

This is not the place to criticise the higher conduct of the Malayan campaign; again that belongs to history and sober reconstruction of many difficult factors. The Battle of Malaya was lost before it started, lost in the myth of Singapore's impregnability, lost in the gross under-estimation of Japan's strength and military cleverness, lost in the belief that it would be impossible to use tanks in Malaya. Australia cannot escape its share of blame for all these things.

Day by day Japanese air strength grew. Day by day our fighting troops were subjected to a persistent aerial bombardment and machine-gunning. The Japanese worked to a time-table. The 'planes began to appear at about 8.30 a.m.; swept the skies, with their swift-scudding clouds, until 1 p.m.; took an hour off for lunch; started up again at 2 p.m.; and finally stopped for the day at about 4.30 p.m. There was little night bombing at the front. Why bomb at night when you can bomb throughout the daylight hours and pick your target without opposition except from ground fire? Why, indeed?

The Japanese bombed cunningly. Seldom did their bombs fall slap into the middle of a road they wanted to use themselves later on. They knew the personnel of transport convoys dashed for the shelter of rubber trees beside the road. Their bombs fell just off the road, the machine gun bullets whistled and pinged as the 'planes zoomed down almost at tree-top level. They bombed the outskirts of aerodromes because they knew it was there that our 'planes would be dispersed. They strafed numbers and numbers of our 'planes on the ground.

They did not cause many casualties by aerial attack, but as the weeks went on this daily and continuous strafing had

its effect on tired men. It did not break their morale, but it made them nervy and dispirited by the lack of our own aircraft. Occasionally one of our fighters would be seen at the front, but only occasionally. They had a satirical saying at the front — "Famous last words — *that's one of ours!*" There was the story of the Indian manning a Bofors gun and firing at a strange 'plane. An officer suddenly recognised it as a Buffalo and shouted, "Don't fire—that's one of ours!" "I don't believe it!" responded the Indian and blazed away harder than ever. Some Australian fighter pilots had hair-raising escapes from our own anti-aircraft fire.

The Japanese were attacking our vital aerodromes one by one and compelling our evacuation. This was their plan and it worked admirably for them. What air strength we had was being forced southwards, and soon our fighters were being held back in preparation for the inevitable defence of Singapore Island itself.

Night after night the long convoys wound along the roads in the darkness as the troops fell back. There was a psychological reaction in the tired soldiers at the knowledge of this nightly withdrawal. There was a stand at Kuala Kangsar, on the border of Perak, and for a moment it seemed as if the Japanese momentum might be halted. But the chance, if it was a chance, was lost.

Now the threat to the west coast was growing. Using the sampans and barges we had so obligingly left behind in Panang, the Japanese were landing and infiltrating around our flank. Small British naval forces did their best to intercept these landings, but, because of lack or aerial support, they could operate only under cover of darkness. The British land commander was in an unenviable dilemma. Lack of aerial reconnaissance denied him knowledge of the strength of these enemy landing parties. He had no reserves. The ranks of his troops were thinned by casualties. If he detached a strong force to deal with these infiltrations it would weaken his main front. If he detached a small force and they were overwhelmed by superior numbers, he was that much worse off.

He chose the safe course and withdrew his forces to a line parallel with the Japanese landings. The line straddling the main road further east had perforce to withdraw in conjunction to protect its flank. This see-saw movement continued inexorably down the peninsula. Ahead of it went a thin pathetic stream of Chinese refugees. They carried their belongings in rickshaws, ox-drawn carts, bicycles. Women trudged along the road with babies slung over their shoulders. Shops were smashed open and looting, afterwards controlled, was rife. One aged wrinkled Chinese was seen on the road one day pulling his rickshaw with a large modern barber's chair stuck in the back. Others looted sewing machines, rolls of silk, radio sets. cases of beer. The shops were wide open; why not take what was in them?

Japanese troops, disguised as Malays, were infiltrating through the British lines. It was difficult to tell a Japanese from a Chinese. Japanese snipers were picking off British soldiers from rubber trees. Fifth columnists were operating with extreme cunning. Long banana leaves, the shine on them easily discernible from the air, were found pointing towards the British headquarters. Bombs followed. Reminiscent of a Hans Andersen fairy story, trails of rice were found leading to British positions. Shirts innocently hanging on a line, were full of menace; the arms indicated a gun position.

The convoys wound and wound along the roads, carrying ammunition, food and the wounded. Food was a major worry. Indian troops needed special food. British troops had not learnt, as the Dutch taught their white officers in Java to live on rice. The Japanese had none of these worries; they lived on the country as they moved remorselessly through it.

The great withdrawal went on, sometimes five miles each night, sometimes ten, twenty, thirty miles. It was a skilful withdrawal, with always hope that aerial reinforcements would arrive in time to establish and hold a Malacca-Mersing defence line. They never arrived.

Veterans of the last war frequently express an almost contemptuous bewilderment at the inability of the British forces to "dig in" and maintain a definite line in Malaya.

They point to the terrific artillery bombardments our troops sustained in France in 1914-18, and draw an unreal parallel with the Japanese aerial bombardments in Malaya. They fail to recognise that modern warfare is not static—except for the winter campaign in Russia — but fluid. Territorial gains, in terms of mere territory, are not decisive. It is a war of swift movements and counter thrusts, for which strong aerial support is essential. There are no "safe" areas in the rear. A modern army's rear is just as vulnerable as its front line. No matter how "impregnable" the Maginot Lines of France, Greece or Malaya, overwhelming enemy air strength can isolate them or reduce them to impotency by attacks on communications and supply lines. There are no "cushy" jobs in modern war; the clerk at Divisional Headquarters and the much-abused "brass-hat" are liable to be under fire just as much as the soldier in the front line. In Malaya it was a constant battle to maintain communications and protect our flanks and rear against a clever and fast-moving enemy who always held the initiative. Whether by more offensive methods even lacking control of the air—we could have struck back decisively is a matter of debate. In no circumstances, however, can such a campaign be compared to the battles of France in 1914-18 or Gallipoli.

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So far, apart from the pugnacious 2/3 Reserve M.T. with the Argylls, the Gurkhas and the Punjabis in their care, the A.I.F. had not yet been engaged.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## THE A.I.F. STRIKES AT LAST.

FOR two months the A.I.F., consisting chiefly of 22nd and 27th Infantry Brigades, had been at their battle stations in the Mersing area on the east coast. Strategists before the war had been convinced that the Japanese would strike at this junction of the roads to Kluang and Johore Bahru. As it happened, the Japanese, to all intents and purposes, by-passed it.

The Australians had prepared strong defensive positions in their sector. "Artillery Hill" at Mersing, overlooking the beach and the small islands offshore, constituted a powerful menace to any sea-borne invading force. When war broke out the Australians at once applied the most drastic and realistic "scorched earth" policy Malaya ever knew. Whole villages were burnt to the ground. Mining machinery was smashed to atoms. Every native inhabitant of the area was compulsorily evacuated. Thereafter anyone straying into the Australian lines did so at considerable personal peril. The Australians were quick on the draw. They knew every inch of the country, every jungle track, every twist of the water-courses and rivers. They were fighting fit and "raring to go." No troops in Malaya had been more rigorously trained in every aspect of jungle warfare. And already small bands of Australian commandos were slipping northwards at night and creating havoc behind the Japanese lines. As Anderson had said, two could play at that game.

Anderson, now a Colonel, had command of 2/19th Battalion. On 1st August Colonel Maxwell had been promoted Brigadier and given command of 27th Infantry Brigade.

The Australians stood by their posts, watching the sea for the expected invasion. As the weeks went by nothing much happened around Mersing. At night they heard the distant and distinctive whine of Japanese bomber formations as they flew high overhead on their way to bomb Singapore. The Japanese, who must surely have known of the Australian positions, chose to ignore them. It was an ironic situation. After nearly a year in Malaya, the A.I.F. still seemed to be baulked of a chance to show their mettle. They began to fret again. They itched for action.

They would have been savage had they known of fifth-column tales circulating amongst the British troops further north to the effect that the Australians would not fight because of the lack of air support. This story was pinned on the half-forgotten statement of a former Australian Prime Minister who said after Greece and Crete that never again would Australian troops go into action without adequate air protection. The statement was wickedly revived and embellished and caused intense bitterness amongst British and Indian troops, who so far had borne the brunt of the fighting. War correspondents' stories about this fifth-column activity asking that Mr. Curtin, the Australian Prime Minister, should issue an unqualified denial, were censored in Singapore.

As it happened, there was a more direct way of scotching these malicious rumours. The Australians went into action. It had an electrifying effect on Malaya.

It was at Gemas, about 150 miles north-west of Singapore, that men of the A.I.F. first fought the Japanese—always remembering the deeds of 2/3 Reserve M.T., who were still battling through bombs and machine-gun bullets from Japanese 'planes along the roads.

The 9th Indian Division, which had fought at Kota Bahru and Kuantan was very fatigued. It was decided to rest them at Batu Anam, just south of Gemas, while the Australians formed

a line in front of them to take the first shock of the expected Japanese attack.

One result was that the 27th Australian Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier Maxwell, had to be taken out of their position at Mersing. It was a great day for everyone when the A.I.F. swung into action. There was a broad grin on the face of a Provost Corporal directing traffic at the Ayer Hitam crossroads, as hour after hour, the Australians drove through from Kluang and turned north. They sang the A.I.F.'s most popular bawdy song, "Oh, Gord blimey how ashamed I was!" They beefed out "Waltzin' Matilda." They made rude gestures at the corporal, who grinned back, as thrilled as the men were themselves. This was the day they had waited for so long. Now it was to be proved whether they were "Glamour Boys" or not. Bronzed as berries, stripped to the waist, with their equipment beside them, they went past, hour by hour, truck by truck. The guns rumbled up and the carriers rattled down the bitumen road.

**"I touched her on the knee—how ashamed I was!**
**"I touched her on the knee—how ashamed I was!**
**"I touched her on the knee; she said 'You're rather free!'**
**"OH, GORD BLIMEY, HOW ASHAMED I WAS!"**

(And other verses progressively indecent.)

Never before had the Ayer Hitam crossroads resounded to a song like that. It rang through the rubber trees, through the kampongs, and the song it sang was "The Australians are coming!" They went into it singing, cheering, jubilant, eager to prove how well they had absorbed their lessons. They proved it, but they were not aware that it was too late, six months, twelve months, too late.

The first defensive position in the country near Gemas, important railroad centre, was covered by young rubber trees four or five feet high, and the ground was fairly open and hilly. The Australian line was covered by the guns of a very efficient artillery regiment from Queensland and New South Wales.

It was some miles in advance of this position at Gemas

that 30th (N.S.W.) Battalion, under the command of Lieut.-Colonel ("Black Jack") Galleghan, decided to ambush the advancing enemy. An ambush unit of one company commander and 20 men were stationed four miles beyond the main advance party. They prepared a bridge for demolition and then waited patiently for the advancing Japanese tanks and infantry. It was a perfect trap and the Japanese went head-first into it. The Australians let the enemy go through, and then blew up the bridge sky-high. The Japanese, still not suspecting a trap, marched on in a straggling column straight into the devastating fire of the advanced A.I.F. forces, in well-concealed positions beside the road.

At least eight Japanese tanks and a whole battalion of Japanese infantry were wiped out in an audacious series of actions of which this was the prelude. The company commander with his 20 men had a torrid time, but they extricated themselves at night; hid in a Malay kampong (village); and eventually rejoined their unit.

Here is a graphic first-hand story of the first ambush, written to his father by a young Australian gunner who took part in it with his troop:—

"Marching up to a bridgehead at a river crossing we concealed ourselves in the jungle flanking a sunken road. For 48 hours we waited, watched, dozed and munched bully beef and biscuits—drenched by the incessant rain. The nights were eerie in the dense dank undergrowth, the waxworks atmosphere being accentuated by the phosphorescent fungus and glow-worms, whilst the haunting calls of the night-creatures but served to emphasise our isolation.

"Dawn of the great day broke clear. A few straggling vehicles of our rearguard crossed the bridge—then nothing. The terse comment of the infantry commander telephoning back to the battalion that anything further coming would be Japanese gave us a thrill of anticipation.

"We had not long to wait. At About four o'clock in the afternoon the look-out announced, 'Large party of cyclists crossing the bridge.' We froze, and my heart stepped into 'high' as on the roadway 15 feet below passed the first of the

enemy. Oblivious of the fate in store for them, they cycled easily under our gaze, laughing and chattering while Aussie fingers tightened around triggers and Mills bomb pins.

"After some hundreds had crossed the river and entered the cutting, the captain gave the order. With a roar like the crack of doom, the bridge and the Japanese on it soared skywards on a dense column of smoke and fragments.

"This was the signal for hellfire to break out. From each side of the road for a length of half a mile the Aussies poured into the congested panic-stricken ranks of the Japanese cyclists a devastating fire with machine-guns, sub-machine-guns and rifles; the while our men leisurely removed pins from Mills grenades and rolled them over the lip of the defile to further rend the enemy ranks with their ear-splitting bursts.

"After a brief but terrible few minutes, the order was given to retire. The job was done, the road a shambles on which not a living thing remained.

"We now had to return to our lines for the major action for which the ambush was but a prelude. Issuing from our post, we found our path to the road being gamely contested by a party of Japanese partly concealed under a thicket. A brisk exchange of fire, and they, too, were silent.

"At this juncture it became apparent that we had become separated from the main body of the company. As we had a number of wounded and the strength of the enemy that had escaped into the jungle was unknown, it was decided to avoid the road lest we be repaid in our own coin and to execute an arc back to our own lines some miles to the rear. Easier said than done!

"After proceeding along these lines in single file through fairly dense undergrowth, we were grounded by a burst of machine-gun spray. We returned the fire and had the satisfaction of seeing the body of a Japanese gunner slump to the ground from the tree where he had been concealed.

"For two hours we lay doggo while the Japanese view halloed in the jungle around us, even calling out 'Hello, Joe!' in an attempt to get us to betray our position. Eventually

silence again settled over the jungle and the whispered order to prepare to move was passed by word of mouth from the head of our little column. All but one arose to obey. He had died quietly as a result of the last encounter. Later we found that two more had been wounded at the same time. .

"Following a compass bearing we marched without hindrance, first on a track, then through virgin jungle over precipitous rain-drenched hills for eight hours of darkness. It was so black that we were as though blinded; each man had to cling to the bayonet scabbard of the preceding man to keep the file together. Only touch and hearing were of use.

"A nightmare night indeed. I cannot hope to describe the slipping, crawling and floundering over invisible logs and vines, into pits that could not be seen; the panting, gasping and cursing with bursting lungs as unseen swamps and mire added almost insuperable handicaps to our progress.

"Eventually at about 2 a.m., ten hours after the start of the action, the aching limbs of even the well-trained infantry demanded a halt. Sinking to the drenched jungle floor, we snatched a few hours of fitful rest.

"At the first hint of daylight we were on our feet again and feeling the first pangs of hunger. A muster produced five small tins of bully beef between thirty of us. We had a mouthful with a biscuit and resumed our climb.

"About noon we emerged from the jungle at a point near that occupied by our old front lines to find the Japanese in possession. They took a few ineffectual pot-shots at us and once more we slid into the jungle. All day we kept up the pressure in the jungle and rubber country and at one stage we even marched along the railway line, relying on Japanese short-sightedness to lead them to believe that we were one of their own patrols.

"Towards nightfall we approached a town, and not being sure of its ownership at the time, once more we took to the friendly jungle which by now had lost much of its awe and mystery. Skirting the town, we emerged at dusk on the local golf course which our scouts found deserted. A Japanese

helmet in the ransacked clubhouse where we had hoped to get badly-needed food proved that he was still ahead of us.

"Had we required any further proof as to our whereabouts, it was available shortly afterwards by the commencement of our own artillery barrage, which for some hours proceeded to pound methodically every objective in the neighbourhood. It was a change for an artilleryman to be on the receiving end for a while, but our detached interest changed to personal concern when they ceased to whistle and the clang of the burst was followed by the 'bee-buzz' of fragments of H.E. flying amongst us. We moved 500 yards to the left, and after counting heads and posting sentries, settled down and slept through the rest of the bombardment.

"Before dawn we set forth again, and by this time the lack of food was evidenced by the heavy drag of our feet, made more leaden by saturation with mud and water on our boots and stockings. Jungle, rubber, swamps, and streams, on we plodded until half way through the morning we emerged into a clearing containing a native house. It was inhabited by a friendly Tamil, who saved our bacon by producing coconut, pineapples and biscuits.

"This humble repast was like a seven-course meal to our famished band. With renewed energy and hope we pressed on by compass to where we thought our lines should be. Our course now lay through rubber, which was fairly easy going, except for the hills which betrayed our aching muscles and overwrought lungs.

"After a few hours a number of our aircraft (rare sight) passed overhead going north-west. They were greeted by machine-gun fire from a post behind us. It looked as though we were through. A little later we heard the approach of an armoured vehicle. We took to cover to give it an appropriate welcome should it prove hostile—but, boy, oh boy! it was one of ours and we actually ran to meet it. . . ."

It was our first clash with the Japanese (said General Gordon Bennett in his official narrative of the action) and it was important that our men should establish the fact that

they were better soldiers than their enemies. The did it. Colonel Galleghan, who was awarded the D.S.O. for his conduct in the battle, realised that in this first encounter he had to show his men the way they were to fight. He led the men personally, and set a stimulating example.

On one occasion Brigadier Maxwell sat beside Galleghan at the telephone while the captain commanding the forward company sent back a "ball-to-ball" description of the fight.

"They are coming at us now," said the captain. "They are attacking from the left. They are holding their hats in their hands. They are shouting not to shoot because they are Indians."

Galleghan to Maxwell: "Are they Indians?"

Maxwell to Galleghan: "Tell them to shoot; there are no Indians in that sector."

Galleghan: "Shoot; there are no Indians in front."

Over the telephone could be heard the rattling and pinging of rifle-fire; the hoarse cries as the Australians charged into action with their bayonets. This was the moment they had been waiting for. They made the most of it.

It was estimated that at least 1,000 Japanese were killed in their first clash with the Australians. The A.I.F. Malaya had blooded themselves, and their enemies. "Menzies' Glamour Boys" were content at last.

## CHAPTER SIX

## THE CRISIS AT MUAR RIVER.

THERE was dog-fighting along the Gemas sector for two days. Gradually, in accordance with General Bennett's design, the Japanese were drawn on to the main defended position, which the Indians were preparing, and they were snugly held there. The Australians had strong fighting patrols on each flank, preventing any infiltrating parties of Japanese from getting round our flanks through the jungle.

It had just been decided to replace the tired 2/30th Battalion with the 2/29th (Victorian) Battalion when the situation at Muar, on the west coast, became critical. The 45th Indian Brigade, new troops with hardly any experience of the difficult Malayan conditions, could not stop the Japanese, who crossed the Muar River and forced them back.

The position became dangerous. A Japanese advance would imperil our flank and threaten our line of communications well to the rear. Something had to be done, and done quickly. The 2/29th Battalion, instead of relieving the 2/30th, was hustled into lorries and rushed across to the Muar front.

It arrived just in time to halt the Japanese advance. In halting it 2/29th Battalion suffered grievous casualties in some of the most ferocious fighting of the Malayan campaign. They arrived at Muar at dusk on Saturday, January 17, and were attacked half an hour later. Another

violent attack was launched against them at dawn the next morning followed by an assault by light Japanese tanks, apparently ferried across the Muar River.

In half an hour the 2/29th anti-tank gunners had destroyed all ten tanks! The battle took place on a road running through a rubber plantation. The Australians once again used ambush methods. The guns were perfectly camouflaged beside the road, and again the Japanese went unsuspectingly into the trap. There was savage joy on the faces of the Australian gunners as the tanks rumbled along the road and were shattered one by one at point-blank range. Soon the road was blazing with smashed and burning enemy tanks. One tank, coming up behind two others that had already been disabled, was sheltered by them from our gunners. The gunners were not to be denied their kill. They dashed up an embankment and hurled hand-grenades and "Molotov Cocktails" on to the tank. The Japanese crews who tried to escape from the blazing tanks were mown down by tommy-gun fire.

That was a magnificent start for 2/29th, and they were jubilant. Meanwhile the Japanese in the centre near Batu Anam had had enough after the thrashing the 2/30th had given them. Pressure ceased there more or less. Rapidly and cleverly the Japanese transferred troops to the Muar front, and the enemy launched what was to all intents and purposes a full-scale offensive. At Muar now were the 1st Japanese Imperial Guards Division, crack seasoned soldiers who had been fighting in China for years. With them in Malaya was the famous Japanese 5th Division. These two divisions had a remarkable record. They had been associated together in many notable actions, especially the capture of Canton where they made an astonishing forced march. The 5th Division were usually used for landing operations, at which they were expert. Behind them would come the Guards, storm troops of undoubted valour and dash. It was these soldiers who faced the Australians at Muar. There were at least 15,000 of them, and possibly more.

Events moved rapidly. Now 2/29th were in grave danger of being overwhelmed as more and more Japanese

troops arrived to exploit the Muar River break-through. At all costs it had to be stopped.

It was decided to send 2/19th Battalion, then stationed at Jemaluang, south of Mersing, to the assistance of 2/29th Battalion.

At 4 a.m. on January 10, the 2/19th began their race across the peninsula. They went out singing, as 28th Brigade had gone out before them. Four and a half hours later they arrived at Yong Peng, where General Bennett had his headquarters. There Colonel Anderson received orders to proceed to Bakri, on the Yong Peng-Muar Road. Two platoons under Lieut. Varley were left behind to hold the vital bridge at Parit Sulong.

It will be difficult for the layman to follow in detail the events of the next five days without proper ordnance maps. A rough picture of the position can only be given.

It should be remembered that the Australians had been taken away from General Bennett and were now under British command. Colonel Anderson contacted Brigadier Duncan, of 45th Indian Brigade, consisting of Gwalis, Jats and Raj Rifles, and was ordered to take up a position covering the Bakri crossroads leading to the Muar River ferry. About a mile ahead was 2/29th Battalion, nursing its wounds after its unequal battle against a flood of Japanese storm troops. Their C.O., Colonel Robertson, had been killed on Sunday night.

The Japanese had swiftly laid down a road block and now the enemy were between 2/19th and 2/29th Battalions. It was a desperate situation, but nothing to what was to come later. At 11 o'clock that morning "A" Company of 2/19th attempted to gain contact with 2/29th, but the attack failed. For the remainder of the day "C" Company carried out aggressive patrols west and allowed a section of 2/19th Carriers under Lieut. Howard to get contact with 2/29th. This the Carriers did in fine style and brought back Captain Gibson of 2/29th for a conference with Colonel Anderson.

At 6 o'clock that night the dispositions of the British forces in the Muar River area were as follow:—

2/29th Battalion forward in a perimeter with the Japanese pouring in more troops all round them.

2/19th Battalion a mile further back at the Bakri cross-roads.

45th Indian Brigade half a mile behind 2/19th.

"B" Echelon (transport, mortars, etc.) of the 2/19th hidden in jungle and rubber country about a mile behind 45th Brigade.

This was the opening scene of Malaya's most heroic battle.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## THE 2/29th COME THROUGH.

AFTER a wild night, with heavy enemy shelling of our positions, the mists on the river rose to find the Australians still holding grimly to their posts. The only alteration during the night had been an enforced withdrawal of half a mile, owing to the Japanese gunners' accuracy, of 2/15th Field Regiment. The Australians were full of fight and still fresh, but overnight the Japanese had consolidated their wedge between the two Australian battalions.

Tuesday began with disaster. Earlier than usual Japanese 'planes were roaring over the beleaguered Muar forces. They were out for the kill. As early as this the position looked hopeless. At 9.30 a.m. bombs landed directly on top of 45th Brigade Headquarters. Only three men survived — Brigadier Duncan, Brigadier Major Anderson and an Assistant Staff Captain. All signals were destroyed.

At the same time "B" Echelon of 2/19th Battalion in the rear got the full force of a similar air blitz. And the Japanese had now got between the main 2/19th force and their "B" Echelon. It was impossible to regain contact at that time. A Carrier tried to get through, but there was a road block and a land mine in their way. The Carrier forced the road block and ran slap on to the land mine. It was blown to smithereens. The crew escaped.

Imagine the position at this stage: practically every component of the British-Australian force was isolated by

immensely superior numbers of the enemy. The most striking feature of the whole Muar River action was that the Japanese, although fighting hard, seemed to take for granted that our forces were doomed to annihilation. How costly their mistake! How gross their underestimation of the spirit of the A.I.F. in Malaya!

Colonel Anderson now took command of the Australians. That afternoon he ordered 2/29th to withdraw and fall back on 2/19th. Up to this point the 2/29th, their commanding officer dead, had stood their ground and defied all efforts of the Japanese to dislodge them. How they obeyed Colonel Anderson's order to fall back to the 2/19th is a story of grim heroism on its own. They fought like tigers against tremendous odds. The Japanese had machine-guns on either side of the road and raked their flanks. But they made it; some of them directly by road; others through the jungle around the flanks of the Japanese.

The 2/29th — or the remnants of this gallant Victorian battalion — reached 2/19th at about 8 a.m., after hours of dogged fighting. There were only 200 of them left out of more than 800. Japanese mortar and machine-gun fire had wreaked a terrible toll. A tattered force, but as full of guts and fight as when they sang their way across the peninsula to Muar River. Some others who were cut off by the Japanese eventually reached General Bennett's headquarters at Yong Peng days later after incredible adventures in the jungle. One party of a captain and seven men went into the jungle waist-deep in mud and slush, and reached 2/19th at 10.30 p.m. that night.

While 2/29th were battering their way back along that tragic mile, things had not been quiet with 2/19th. Our artillery had done excellent work, but most of it was shooting from the map. Then suddenly the Japanese launched a heavy attack on the south and captured high ground overlooking and within 150 yards of 2/19th Battalion Headquarters. "A" Company went in to attack. They retook the hill, but were heavily pressed. Colonel Anderson ordered "B" Company to make a flank attack on the Japanese. It was very successful. The Japanese retreated, leaving at least 80

casualties behind them. "B" Company had suffered only two wounded.

The 8th Division Signals wireless truck, manned by Corporal G. Bingham and two others, had been operating smoothly despite shells and bombs. They had kept in constant communication with General Bennett. And that afternoon a message had been received ordering Colonel Anderson to withdraw on Yong Peng.

As the quick tropic darkness blanketed the jungle and the rubber trees, the two Australian battalions and the Indians formed a night perimeter. The night was so dark that it restricted patrols, but Anderson was taking no chances. The sentries strained their eyes into the depths of the jungle, their fingers lightly on the triggers of tommy-guns and rifles with bayonets fixed. Nobody slept. In the event of trouble the men were ordered to use their bayonets as much as possible. Ammunition had to be conserved and, moreover, rifle fire gave away positions. The Japanese were experts at "noises." They let off sham fusillades and then attacked from another direction. "Make your killing quiet," said Anderson. "The bayonet. The bayonet every time. Those little varmints don't like it, especially at night."

As he watched his men snatching a meal of "hard tack," Anderson wondered what to-morrow would hold in store for them. At any rate now they were all together in one force. He saw clearly enough that they could expect little outside help; they would have to fight their own way out. Well, he had the fighters; Providence would have to do the rest. Something else was worrying Anderson. That day they had run out of liquid morphia; there were only a few tablets left, and every hour the number of wounded was growing.

* * *

General Bennett's headquarters were in a barn-like building under the rubber trees near Yong Peng.

The General, this Wednesday morning, was standing in front of his "situation map" and there was anxiety on his face. The "doomed" Australian battalions had been placed under his command again, and it was his job to get them out of a seemingly impossible situation.

In the distance could be heard the "boom" of Japanese bombs and the drone of Japanese 'planes seeking out his position. Strolling around the headquarters were three or four steel-helmeted Australian soldiers, grim-faced, stripped to the waist, with wicked-looking tommy-guns slung under their shoulders. Their naked brown torsos dripped with sweat. As the General studied his map, an army truck drove up; out of it were pushed four blindfolded Chinese, or perhaps Japanese. They were hustled under some trees and there Intelligence officers cross-examined them. Later they were taken away.

The drone of Japanese 'planes came closer. A "spotter" cried sharply, "*Take Cover!*" Headquarters personnel moved under the shadow of the rubber trees. Work proceeded in the building. The General studied his map. Outside everything was as still as death except for the drone of the bombers. A few bombs thudded down harmlessly and there was a splatter of machine-gun fire, and then the droning died away.

The General was worried because he had had no word from Colonel Anderson since 6.30 p.m. on the previous evening. From the wireless truck had come an ominous silence. The previous night he had sent a message in cipher ordering Colonel Anderson to destroy all transport and withdraw on Yong Peng. Then silence. The General's anxiety was reflected on the faces of everyone at headquarters. The faces of the guards with the tommy-guns were grimmer than ever. They knew that the battalions were trying to smash their way through those terrific road blocks and the chances of them succeeding were pretty slim.

Then later on in the day suddenly, dramatically, a laconic message came over the wireless. "We now east of road block stop most of equipment still intact." It galvanised headquarters. A great load dropped from General Bennett's shoulders. The guards with the tommy-guns grinned and swaggered through the trees.

"They've still got to force their way along that causeway," thought the General, "and after that there's only the bridge at Parit Sulong."

As he strode up and down, a motor bike hurtled up to headquarters. Off it unsteadily got a burly Provost Corporal. There were streaks of blood across his face; his shirt and shorts were dirt-stained; he was shaken and he was panting.

"They got two direct hits on the crossroads, sir. Knocked out a Bofors and three Indians. There's a big crater in the middle of the road; no chance of transport getting through. Just missed me, sir; I dived into a ditch. The ——s machine-gunned me."

"Did you tell the Pioneers?"

"Yes, sir. They're repairing it now. Should be fixed in half an hour."

"Good! Carry on, Corporal."

"Yes, sir."

After the corporal had gone the General suddenly wondered whether the last message from Anderson had been genuine. Better check up; one never knew with the Japanese —they were shrewd little devils. What if they had captured the wireless truck and were sending him bogus messages? It *did* seem incredible that Anderson's men should have forced those blocks. The General beckoned one of his staff officers to his side.

A little later a strange conversation took place between A.I.F. Headquarters and the wireless truck that was dodging bombs somewhere along the Bakri road.

"Is that you, Geoff?"

"Yes."

"We got your last message."

"Yes."

"How's Max?"

"He's all right."

"How's Cyril?"

"Cyril? Who's Cyril?"

"What's the name of that street near the Petersham Town Hall?"

"You mean New Canterbury Road with that pub on the corner?"

"You'll do, Geoff."

"Say, what's it all about, anyway?"

"Tell you some day, Geoff. Cheerio!"

"Cheerio! . . . 'Struth, did you hear that one? It was bloody close! Wouldn't it! . . . ."

They went to the General.

"It's Bingham all right, sir."

"Good!" said General Bennett. "Good."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## THE LONG ROAD HOME.

THERE had been sudden tropic thunder during the night and lightning spilling blue quicksilver across the Strait of Malacca, but the dawn came quietly along the roads that led to Muar River. The dawn comes quickly in Malaya; there is a small chill wind that rustles the leaves of the rubber trees; and then the dawn breaks like the sudden lifting of the curtain on a drama. One moment it is night; and the next moment it is day.

There was silence around Muar River, where the mists were rising and evaporating, but it was a menacing silence. Amongst the trees were sinister shadows; there was an urgency of movement everywhere. Swift clouds dashed across the flushed face of the sun; those clouds would soon hide the rushing silver wings of Japanese bombers, prettiest murderers in Malaya.

Long before dawn broke the wounded were made as comfortable as possible in trucks and all other unessential equipment destroyed. This was to be the most dreadful day of all; this was to be Australia's greatest day in Malaya, to rank with Gallipoli, Greece, Crete and Rabaul.

At 7 a.m. the columns began the long road home — 2/19th Battalion forward, then 2/29th Battalion transport and artillery, with Indians of 45th Brigade under Colonel Anderson, covering the rear.

*Now there were less than* 1,000 *Australians left and an indeterminate number of Indians. On all sides of them were closing in* 15,000 *or more crack Japanese troops.*

An hour later contact was made with the Japanese, at the 99 Mile Post. The first of the road blocks was encountered — there were to be *seven miles of road blocks* before the day was through. The first road block, consisting of rubber trees fallen across the road, was covered by a well-dug Japanese strongpost, on top of a cutting with six machine-guns spitting death from it. "Great difficulty," says a bald official story, "was experienced in taking the position." The Australians charged with fixed bayonets. "B" Company 2/19th Battalion took the north side of the cutting.

On the south side Colonel Anderson took it with seven men. He ordered "A" Company to create a diversion elsewhere and then charged into action, a dynamic figure at the head of his small force. He put one gun out of action with a grenade and with his revolver shot dead two Japanese soldiers manning the other machine-gun. That was the beginning of Anderson's Victoria Cross, greatest tribute to valour the British Empire can award.

The 2/19th tell you Anderson won it five times over. His physical endurance was astonishing. Throughout the fight back to the bridge at Parit Sulong he was as lively as a cricket. He was here, there and everywhere. He had a word for everyone. He had tactical genius of a rare sort. He was cheerful at all times and he never lost his grip on the situation. His mind was as lively as his body. This, and his complete disregard of personal safety, inspired his men to tremendous heights. Anderson was on human safari; he was stalking the Japanese as he had stalked in Africa. The 2/19th would cheerfully have laid down their lives for him.

The whole composite force was on the main road now, and the road blocks were almost continuous. The Japanese had worked fast and efficiently. Some of the blocks were composed of fallen rubber trees; others of jungle poles tied together.

Heavy Japanese shelling was directed on the Indians in the rear during the morning. Our motor transport began to move east again at 11.45 a.m. with infantry deployed in the adjoining rubber country. At times the hills were black with Japanese troops. One Australian officer at this stage killed fifty Japanese with bursts from a Vickers gun. There was no "white shirt and sandshoes" about these enemy troops. They were hand-picked soldiers dressed in greenish-khaki tunics, slacks, half-puttees and black hobnailed boots. They came on and on. The branches of the rubber trees seemed to be alive with snipers. They were hard to distinguish. They waited until the Australians went through and then tried to pick off the officers. Some of them had wireless transmitters strapped to their chests. They wirelessed back positions and then the Japanese 4-inch mortars would crash down. There was an heroic Australian private who volunteered as a human target. He walked down the centre of the road alone, while his comrades with tommy-guns crept alongside amongst the rubber trees. There were a lot of dead Japanese snipers that day. The private was wounded, but fought his way on to Parit Sulong.

The Australians smashed their way through the second road block and neared where "B" Echelon 2/19th Battalion had been assailed from the air. Colonel Anderson passed the word to his Company commanders: "We will see some grim sights here; get the boys singing."

So they sang "Waltzin' Matilda"—it was the only song they all knew. "B" Echelon area was a shambles of shattered motor vehicles and shattered bodies. Ghastly the sights that met the eyes of the enraged Australians. They charged with their bayonets, singing, but there was no joy in the singing, only a cold deadly rage. They took their vengeance at the point of the bayonet. All the vehicles of "B" Echelon were out of action, and there was no sign of Lieutenant Varley's platoon which had been relieved at the Parit Sulong bridge by five Norfolk platoons.

Saddened by the loss of fine cobbers, the force moved on again at 12.15 p.m. to contact the Japanese in considerable strength and to run into no fewer than six road blocks.

Fierce fighting continued all that afternoon as Anderson's men made superhuman efforts to force the Japanese positions. Success was only limited, and casualties were heavy. Bayonet charge after bayonet charge was made, but the men were too tired to sing now. Their long ordeal was beginning to show on their haggard, unshaven faces, but they weren't beaten yet — not by a long chalk. Very heavy attacks were made by the Japanese on our rear, supported by intense artillery and mortar shelling. In a charge by Gwalis, which he personally led, Brigadier Duncan was killed.

By 5.30 p.m. the situation was critical and the force had gradually contracted into about 800 yards of roadway. Colonel Anderson held a council of war with his officers. He made no attempt to disguise their plight. "It is a case of death or going through, gentlemen," he said in his precise way. "*And we're going through!*"

He decided on a dusk attack. As the shadows lengthened under the rubber trees and the swollen sun slid down towards the horizon, the Australians made their supreme effort. Every man was fighting mad. Mortar shells were directed on to targets by infantrymen a few yards away. Gunners of 2/15 Field Regiment were fighting with rifles and bayonets and axes. The range was too short for their 25-pounders. Yelling and cursing, the gunners grabbed axes, tackled the Japanese with them, ran the gauntlet of murderous machine-gun fire, and slashed recklessly at a block across the road. One 25-pounder crew pushed their gun around a cutting and blew a road block formed of vehicles to smithereens at 75 yards range. Bren-gun Carriers rattled forward to within five yards of a Japanese machine-gun nest and blew it to bits.

Beside the road was a house with concrete walls four inches thick. In it were 60 Japanese with three machine-guns. Spurting death, they had been giving the Australians hell, but nothing could stand up to this onrushing tide of fighting-mad Australians. Two Carriers charged forward to within ten yards range and raked the house with Vickers gun fire from ground to roof. Thirty Japanese soldiers rushed out and were cut to ribbons.

Now there was only one road block left before the long ten miles causeway to Parit Sulong. The capture of the concrete house was the turning point of the battle. A call was made for volunteers to force the remaining road block. Twenty men responded. They raced ahead with axes under a hail of machine-gun bullets and chopped the block to pieces. The Australians charged through with bayonets — and the day was won.

At about 6.30 p.m. the Japanese had had enough. Their dead lay strewn in hundreds across the roadway and sprawled under the rubber trees. They gvae up the fight and retired. Colonel Anderson's column, its ranks thinner than ever, moved on and contact with the enemy was lost.

Colonel Anderson, as he marched indefatigably with his men, was proud of them. Badly as they needed rest and food, he had relentlessly to drive them on. There was a tight smile under the sweat and blood on his face. If they could stumble along the causeway during the night and cross the bridge at Parit Sulong before dawn, all would be well. From there it was only a few miles to General Bennett's main forces —and safety.

* * *

It was as well Anderson did not have in advance the heart-breaking knowledge that the Bridge at Parit Sulong was no longer in British hands. It was as well that he did not know the Norfolks had withdrawn from the bridge and the high ground dominating it.

Earlier that day the news had caused consternation at A.I.F. Headquarters. The withdrawal seemed to seal the doom of the Australians who had come so far at such cost and were now almost in sight of relief.

General Bennett acted with characteristic vigour. First of all he sent out a party of tried guerrillas under Captain Lloyd with orders to try and work their way around the Japanese and hold the bridge long enough to let the beleaguered battalions through. Then he got into his car and hurried some miles beyond Yong Peng.

There at intervals came three other staff cars. As Japanese bombers droned overhead, the four Generals in whose hands was the destiny of Malaya, met under the cover of the rubber trees in a dramatic two hours' conference. They met actually on an estate at the other end of which was then progressing bitter fighting. The generals were General Percival, G.O.C., Malaya, General Heath, General Key and General Bennett. What was said at that meeting has not yet been told; let it suffice that afterward General Percival explained the position frankly to waiting British, American and Australian War Correspondents.

The map was laid out on the ground and the General, the scarlet around his cap contrasting vividly with the green countryside, placed his finger on the bridge at Parit Sulong.

"We are going to counter attack at two o'clock this afternoon," he said. "We hope to regain the high ground here and capture the bridge. That will allow those gallant Australian battalions to go through. General Bennett has also sent out commandos to worry the Japanese by infiltrations. . . ."

The conference broke up. General Bennett was smiling as he left. There was another chance for his beloved Australians.

**But the counter attack never took place. At 2 p.m. it was postponed until 5.30 p.m. At 5.30 p.m. it was postponed until dawn on the following morning. At dawn it was postponed until 9.30 a.m. At 9.30 a.m. it was abandoned altogether. There has been no official explanation of the abandonment of this counter attack; history will perhaps provide one.**

It was as well that Colonel Anderson and his men, battling along the Bakri Road, were unaware of these things.

## CHAPTER NINE

## THE BRIDGE AT PARIT SULONG

ALL through the night the tattered force trudged along the long stone causeway which ran in a dead straight line across the steamy swamp country.

An advance guard went ahead, then Carriers trundled along at the head of the main body. Then came the trucks filled with badly wounded men, with armoured cars at the rear. The infantry troops marched in single file on each side of the road. The "walking wounded" limped on through the night, some of them with blood-soaked bandages across their foreheads, others with arms in slings. Occasionally a man would help his cobber along. It was sheer fortitude that got them through.

It was a tragic cavalcade of gaunt, bearded men, perilously on the edge of physical exhaustion, but the Japanese, licking their wounds from the savage encounter farther back and prevented by the swamps from staging any heavy flank attacks, allowed them along the causeway without much interference. At the rear, however, the enemy were pressing on and tightly closing any gap towards Muar.

At 3 a.m. Lieutenant Varley, who had been relieved by the Norfolks at Parit Sulong, rejoined his unit with 50 men. At about the same time a wounded Indian Sepoy strayed into the lines. He told Colonel Anderson that he had been

fired on by Japanese that afternoon at Parit Sulong. It was a shock to Anderson to hear of the presence of Japanese in this area.

Two Despatch Riders were sent forward to check the Indian's report. The Don R's raced to the bridge. Their full headlights showed up a sandbagged barricade across the western end of the bridge. In the glare of the light they saw four coloured soldiers in pith helmets. The Australians were challenged in a foreign language, but were not fired on.

The Don R's hurried back and reported to Anderson, whose suspicions were now thoroughly aroused. He sent a patrol forward to the bridge. This time the Australians were fired on.

Dawn broke as the force came in sight of the little village of Parit Sulong beside the river. Colonel Anderson, bitterly disappointed by events, decided to attack the bridge at 7 a.m. The bridge over the river at Parit Sulong was a concrete arc about 80 yards long.

Colonel Anderson, Major Anderson (of 45th Brigade) and Lieutenant S. F. Burt (Intelligence Officer of 2/19th Battalion) went forward and met an English-speaking Malay. He told them that there was no need to worry about the bridge; it was held by members of the Johore Military Forces. The Malay led these three officers and their small escort into a Japanese ambush, but Colonel Anderson was equal to the occasion. Using his voice, he ordered four companies of 2/19th to attack at once. "A" Company suffered heavily, only four men being left out of one platoon.

The bridge, definitely in Japanese hands, was ideally suited for defence and the enemy had exploited it to the full. It was very strongly defended by machine-gun nests in adjoining houses. After bitter fighting, however, the west side of the bridge was captured, but further progress was found to be impossible without air support. The range was too short for our artillery and our mortars were ineffective against the houses.

# GRIM GLORY

*There was one bright feature that morning: at about 8 a.m. three British aeroplanes flew overhead and dropped, by parachutes, sorely-needed supplies of morphia, water and bully beef.*

At about 11 a.m. the Australian position was in the form of a triangular perimeter with the apex at the bridge. After a heavy artillery barrage and intense machine-gunning of the road from the air, the Japanese launched another tank attack. It fared no better than other tank attacks they had made against the Australians. One tank was destroyed by small-arms fire and two others by accurate shooting by our anti-tank gunners.

A cheer went up when what seemed to be a squadron of British bombers soared overhead. Jubilation was short-lived when the planes rained down anti-personnel bombs; it was discovered afterwards that they were American planes originally delivered to Thailand and the Japanese had used them to deceive us. There was no doubt about it — the Japanese were devilishly cunning fighters.

Fate was dealing heavy and decisive blows against the Australians now. Gradually the rear was forced in by vicious Japanese attacks and a mounting list of Australian casualties. As darkness came down the enemy launched yet another tank attack along the road, but it, too, was smashed. A direct hit by a 25-pounder blasted one tank; bombs and Mills hand grenades destroyed five others.

The Japanese fell back again. This small Australian force seemed indestructible, unconquerable.

* * *

For four days the wireless truck under Corporal Bingham had led a charmed life. Nerve-centre of the beleaguered battalions, it had functioned day and night. It had survived shells, mortar fire, bombs and machine-gunning. Bingham and his two assistants had stuck manfully to their tasks. There were only two of them now. One of the men had been wounded but had refused to leave his post. Then a bullet from a Japanese sniper in a rubber tree had killed him. The other two carried on, receiving and transmitting vital messages.

At first, when they were allotted to 45th Brigade, they had a two-way wireless set, but later much of their equipment was destroyed. Undaunted, they managed to build up a composite set from the remains of various wireless sets in the area. At one stage messages were being transmitted by a key improvised by joining two leads together. But they could not build new wireless batteries, and now the precious batteries had begun to fade and messages were difficult to receive. Soon the batteries were useless.

And not long afterwards shells wrecked the truck altogether. Bingham (who was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal) and his remaining assistant, Max Benoit (Military Medal), had miraculous escapes from death. Benoit was wounded three times before the action finished, but refused to give in.

* * *

The plight of the wounded was causing Colonel Anderson more and more concern. Some of the men were in a bad shape and suffering dreadfully. The festering tropic climate of Malaya was no place for a wounded man without proper medical attention. They had sufficient morphia now to deaden agony from jagged splinter wounds, but that was not enough.

Anderson resolved on a desperate mercy move. He selected 15 of the most badly wounded and had them placed in two ambulance trucks marked with the Red Cross, and called for volunteer drivers and attendants from the slightly wounded men. There was no shortage of volunteers.

Just before dark the trucks were slowly driven up to the sandbag barricade at the bridge. They were not fired upon and a driver, carrying a white flag, was escorted to the Japanese commander in Parit Sulong village. Somebody was found who could speak English. The Australian explained that the men in the trucks were so seriously wounded that even if they recovered they would never fight again. They had been chosen that way so as not to cause any embarrassment to the Japanese. Would the Japanese commander allow them safe conduct to the British lines?

The Japanese commander was polite, but firm. The ambulances were to remain in the middle of the road as a road block. He could not discuss terms of any kind unless the whole of the Australians surrendered unconditionally.

The driver returned to Colonel Anderson with the message. Colonel Anderson's jaw set. Hard as the decision was to the wounded men at the bridge, he knew that his men would never surrender now. They had come so far, had suffered so much. They would sooner all die fighting to the last. He refused to countenance the Japanese commander's proposal. He considered for a while the possibility of attempting a withdrawal towards the sea, but increasing pressure on the road at the rear by enemy tanks and artillery foredoomed that to failure.

Night came down on a fantastic scene like the defence of a covered wagon against Red Indians in the pioneer days of America. The Australians were clustered in a small perimeter around upwards of 25 trucks, including those marooned with the wounded at the bridge. It was a pitch-dark night with pale stars stabbing the black velvet canopy of the sky. Away back along the road to Muar were blazing Australian trucks and blazing Japanese tanks luridly lighting the darkness. It was so dark otherwise that patrolling was restricted. The Japanese were active at the bridge and there were several bayonet clashes in the darkness.

At midnight, when there was a lull in the fighting, Lieutenant ("Baby") Austin, himself badly wounded, and a private stole out into the darkness toward the trucks with the wounded at the bridge. They slid from rubber tree to rubber tree like shadows and crawled along the road to the stationary trucks.

Austin reached the back to the nearest truck and whispered into it: "Hang tight, boys, I'm going to let the brakes off!"

One after another Austin and his companion loosened the brakes of the trucks and guided them as silently as possible into the Australian lines. Darkness had been their protection; the Japanese were scarcely aware of the move.

"Good work!" said Anderson, putting out his hand. "Good work!"

## CHAPTER TEN

## THE GAP IN THE CIRCLE

GENERAL BENNETT'S final message to the beleaguered Australian forces at Parit Sulong, if still in existence, should find a permanent resting place in Australia's National War Memorial at Canberra. It wrote "finis" to an extraordinary feat of arms, an extraordinary epic of courage and self-sacrifice and devotion to duty, of which Australia and the whole British Empire should well be proud.

It was despatched from Yong Peng at five minutes past eleven o'clock in the morning on Thursday, 22nd January, 1942, and read:—

"Regret that there little prospect any success attacks 78 M-80M to help you Lloyds party if successful should have appeared before this. 20 of your men and many Indians already returned via river to mine then track to road which is present our possession 78 M. You may at your discretion leave wounded with volunteers destroy heavy equipment and escape. Sorry unable help after your heroic effort. Good luck. Gordon Bennett."

Ironically enough, the message never reached its destination; by this time the wireless truck was incapable of receiving messages.

There was nothing else General Bennett could do except wish these brave men of his command good luck in escaping through the ever-increasing cordon of Japanese

fire around them. The counter attack which might have saved them had never taken place; and Lloyd's commandos had not been successful.

Already survivors of the action, cut off by the Japanese somewhere along that road of death and destruction, were drifting into Yong Peng in small parties. They had appalling stories to tell, but proud stories. They were unshaven and gaunt, and their uniforms were in a sorry mess where they had plunged into swamps and morasses and swum rivers. Some of their feet were in a shocking condition. Some of them had raw, festering wounds. But they were all still unconquerable; they were all concerned chiefly about their cobbers, who were still out in the jungle somewhere trying to fight their way back. They were all loud in the praises of that remarkable man who had brought the force through to Parit Sulong—Colonel Anderson, of Muar.

* * *

The position of the Australians on Friday morning rapidly became untenable after daylight. There was no chance of breaking across the bridge. The Japanese were so strong there now that progress was barred by a deadly phalanx of machine-guns. Heavy enemy artillery shelling began as daylight broke and caused more tragic gaps in the ranks of the Australians.

Colonel Anderson came to a quick decision. There was only one way out and that was to move north, swing east and fight their way through the Japanese towards Yong Peng. The remnants of them should go out as they had gone in — as a composite fighting force. Anderson gave orders for the destruction of all equipment, including transport and guns.

Half an hour before the bid for safety was made, gallant Major Anderson, of 45th Brigade, was killed by machine-gun fire from the air as he sheltered in a ditch. It was a sad ending to an Englishman who had won the unstinted admiration of the Australians. He had fought side by side with them, using the rifle, tommy-gun and hand grenades, with complete disregard of personal danger.

Sadly the Australians drew the trucks with the wounded into the side of the road. Eighteen-ton Japanese tanks had been reported coming up from Muar — they would have scant mercy on trucks in the middle of the road. There were farewells that morning that would be an intrusion on personal feelings to narrate. This was the hardest part of all; to leave good comrades behind after what they had gone through together these last five days. There were hand-shakes and husky farewells and unashamed emotion on the faces of these haggard fighting men. There were messages to deliver "if you ever get home, old man." There were men who turned away because, physically overwrought, it was more than they could bear . . . .

Company by company, the Australians moved out at five minute intervals in deployed formation on a bearing of 340 degrees to a distance of 1,000 yards, and then turned east. The Japanese in that sector saw them coming and mis-interpreted it to be a strong counter attack. They hurriedly withdrew and left a gap 500 yards up the Sempang River, between the edge of the Japanese lines and the river.

The battle of Muar River was over, and Providence had come to the aid of the Australians at the last moment. They hurried through the miraculous gap towards Bukit Incas. There were to be long hours of wading through swamps, of plunging through jungle and rubber, ahead of them—but they were safe, and the Japanese had let them slip out of the trap. They were guided by friendly Chinese and Malays, who gave them water and food.

During the five days of fighting it was estimated that the Australians had killed anything from 1,000 to 3,000 of Japan's frontline soldiers. The rifle and bayonet had proved to be the decisive weapon. Infantrymen had averaged 50 rounds per man and 8 out of 10 shots had taken effect.

There were countless examples of individual bravery. There was a Sergeant who lay in a Regimental Aid Post with a bad wound in his neck; who grabbed a rifle and joined his mates in the battle line when things were critical. There was a red-haired ex-schoolmaster who rode his motor-bike through hell and back, tearing along roads ringed with

snipers, sometimes with gallant Major Anderson riding pillion behind him with a tommy-gun stuck under his arm. There was a Carrier Corporal who fought all day with a wound in his back, got another wound in his leg and had to be more or less forcibly dragged from his Carrier. There was a doctor who upheld all the finest traditions of his profession under the most awful conditions. There was a young, smooth-faced Presbyterian Padre whose courage the 2/19th Battalion will not easily forget. It will be tactful not to chronicle some of his exploits in the field. There was a Regimental Sergeant-Major nicknamed "Hip-Hi," a giant of a man with tremendous physique and stamina who had spent most of his life in New Guinea and the Solomons Islands. A crack rifleshot, "Hip-Hi," when night fell, would go out alone stalking Japanese snipers with conspicuous success. He was reported missing after Parit Sulong, but swaggered up a fortnight later, a great bearded figure of a man who had led a small party of Australians right across the peninsula to the east coast and safety.

So ended Parit Sulong. The 2/19th Battalion finally reached Johore Bahru for re-organisation. They consisted of 271 officers and men, including 52 wounded. Their casualties had been: 72 killed, 76 wounded and missing, *remainder missing, and probably exceeding* 400 *men.*

Who knows how many of these men may still be "somewhere in Malaya" hidden in Malay kampongs and Chinese villages? Only time can lift the veil on their fate, but if resourcefulness counts for anything, there is no need for those who seek news of these men to lose hope. Moreover, General Gordon Bennett has given his opinion that the Japanese will treat their Australian prisoners fairly, an opinion shared by this writer. There was no evidence of organised Japanese "atrocities" in the Malayan campaign.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## ACROSS THE CAUSEWAY

MANY stories could be told about the death agonies of Singapore Island, but this is not the place to tell them. As an epilogue to this story of the bridge at Parit Sulong, let us rather use General Bennett's official narrative of the withdrawal across the Johore Causeway and the final surrender—a surrender that had been inevitable to those in authority some weeks before.

"After Parit Sulong," said General Bennett, "the Japanese concentrated on Batu Pahat, farther down the west coast. Here, as elsewhere along the west coast, they landed men in sampans they had seized. Troops who had just arrived from England and were quite unused to Malayan conditions had the sector here, and they were unsuccessful in their attempt to deny the enemy a landing at Batu Pahat. This meant that our main force at Gemas was almost cut off about 60 miles south of them.

"Our withdrawal from Gemas, which our men had so long and so skilfully defended, was one of the saddest events of the campaign from the Australian point of view. The men up there had resolved not to give any ground, and they had succeeded, but circumstances forced their withdrawal after they had so thoroughly proved their superiority over the Japanese.

"During the next week the whole force was gradually withdrawn, keeping a close eye on the Batu Pahat flank and the west coast generally, where the Japanese were

still landing from sampans, to make sure that the Japanese did not cut the road behind it. This meant withdrawing the last two battalions—2/18th and 2/20th—from the Mersing position. The men were saddened by the realisation they had to withdraw without testing the strength of the defences.

"Sadly the men crossed the Causeway to Singapore Island. By the time the force reached the Island all our reinforcements had been absorbed and all our battalions were restored to their full numbers. But the new Australians were only partly trained. Our position was strengthened by the arrival of 4th (Western Australian) Machine-gun Battalion.

"The seven Australian battalions were give the western half of the island from the Causway inclusive. The A.I.F. had with it the 44th Indian Brigade. The 3rd Indian Corps, with the newly-arrived English division, occupied the north-east part, and Singapore fortress troops defended the only part of the island where defences had been prepared — positions on the south coast. The task of the Australians was to begin from the beginning to build defensive positions along a very long front. It was then that they felt far more than before their serious weakness in the air.

"Previously enemy aircraft had not been able to do serious damage because troops had the concealment of rubber plantations and jungle. But when the men began to build beach posts for guns and machine-guns and beach lights, Japanese aircraft flew up and down, bombing and machine-gunning them, unmolested except by the fire of anti-aircraft guns.

"The Japanese were able to observe Australian positions so closely from the air that they had maps, which we captured afterwards, showing the position of every one of our mortars, machine-guns, searchlights and field guns. When their bombardment began they destroyed every beach light and gun in the sector. They launched their attacks in boats in the dark and by concentrating all their efforts on one section completely overwhelmed the thin defence.

"The front was too wide to be held by so small a force. By continual pressure the Japanese were able to

force back our depleted units. Our units received inadequate support from others now holding parts of the line. It must be remembered that many of these troops were completely exhausted after the long fight in Malaya, and the new formations were only partly trained and were quite unused to Malayan conditions.

"Even at this stage the A.I.F. managed to form a strong perimeter, against which the enemy were smashed over and over again. But over and over again retirements on our flanks forced withdrawals until our line approached the city of Singapore itself. Then the enemy was able to concentrate his whole air forces and many of his guns on Singapore, which was gradually being reduced to a heap of rubble. Casualties among civilians were very heavy, the city's water supply was cut off, and circumstances developed which ultimately forced the surrender of Singapore.

"During the final stages our numbers were so depleted in the A.I.F. that it was found necessary to use non-combatant troops to occupy positions in the firing line. These men—Signallers, Army Service Corps, and Ordnance—did fine work. Everyone had his tail up at the end. We occupied the perimeter, from which we refused to budge, and it was in this position that we stood when the decision to surrender was made."

## *APPENDIX*

## AWARDS FOR GALLANTRY IN MALAYA

The following is an official list of A.I.F. Honours and Awards, and their citations, so far announced for the Malayan campaign:—

### VICTORIA CROSS

*Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Grover Wright Anderson, M.C., C.O., 2/19th Battalion.*

"During operations in Malaya from January 18th to January 22nd, 1942, Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson, in command of a small force, was sent to restore a vital position and to assist a Brigade. His force destroyed 10 enemy tanks. When later cut off he defeated persistent attacks on his position from air and ground forces and forced his way through the enemy line to a depth of 15 miles. He was again surrounded and subjected to very heavy and frequent attacks, resulting in severe casualties to his force.

"He personally led an attack with great gallantry on the enemy, who were holding the bridge, and succeeded in destroying four guns.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson throughout all this fighting protected his wounded and refused to leave them. He obtained news by wireless of the enemy position and attempted to fight his way back through eight miles of enemy-occupied country. This proved impossible and the enemy

were holding too strong a position for any attempt to be made to relieve them. On January 19th, Lieutenant-Colonel Anderson was ordered to destroy his equipment and make his way back as best he could round the enemy position. Throughout the fighting, which lasted four days, he set a magnificent example of brave leadership, determination and outstanding courage. He not only showed fighting qualities of a very high order, but, throughout, exposed himself to danger without any regard for his own personal safety."

## DISTINGUISHED SERVICE ORDER

*Lieutenant-Colonel F. G. Galleghan, E.D., C.O., 2/30th Battalion.*

Lieutenant-Colonel Galleghan conceived a plan and personally supervised the whole operation, and by initiative, coolness and resourcefulness he was able, with one company, to ambush several hundred of the enemy, that company destroying utterly 500 of the enemy, and itself suffering only slight casualties.

"Throughout the ensuing battle he personally directed operations and by personal example, cool and quick decisions at a time when the fate of his battalion was in the balance, he not only withheld a determined attempt by the enemy to force a withdrawal, but inflicted very severe casualties. His calmness during this period played a very important part in maintaining the morale of his troops in spite of continued heavy dive-bombing attacks on the area from which he directed his operation. At no time was any portion of his unit out of control and when forced by a force far superior in numbers to that of his own to withdraw to a line behind the S. Muar, he again conceived and carried out a plan which enabled the whole battalion to break contact with the enemy and re-establish a solid front. Again his courage was exemplary, as he saw each company out of its contact and remained until the last to ensure the safety of his men.

# APPENDIX

"Throughout the whole of these operations, without artillery or air support, and opposed by a force of at least a brigade strength, the battalion suffered only between 100 and 150 casualties, killed, wounded and missing, of which only 12 were known to have been killed."

## MILITARY CROSS

*Captain D. J. Duffy, 2/30th Battalion.*

"This officer was detailed to the difficult duty of covering the bridge at 633303 and conducting the ambush operations. As a result of his leadership it is estimated that 500 Japanese were killed. The surviving Japanese counter attacked and some severe hand-to-hand fighting was indulged in. Throughout this phase Captain Duffy, by personal example and courage, directed the further killing of many of the enemy. He then re-organised his company and endeavoured to lead them back to our position and it was then dark. The enemy were again contacted and casualties inflicted. As a result of this action the company became separated into two groups. Captain Duffy led his group back to the new position east of Gemas after 39 hours in jungle and in the enemy-occupied area."

*Captain J. L. Taylor, Australian Army Medical Corps, 2/30th Battalion.*

"This officer is R.M.O. of a unit and the courageous manner in which he moved about the battlefield under all conditions of fire both day and night, and the coolness with which he performed his duties, excited the admiration of all ranks. He has by his courage and devotion to duty inspired all ranks with confidence and by his complete disregard for his personal safety deserves recognition."

*Major T. G. Vincent, 2/19th Battalion.*

"During the engagements at Bakri and Parit Sulong, Major Vincent showed the greatest determination and leadership whilst acting as 2 i/c of a battalion.

"He was constantly on either one or the other fronts gaining information and directing operations. He showed a complete disregard for personal safety. He organised and led counter attacks where necessary. He gained information by penetrating into occupied territory under heavy enemy fire and was able to get this information back.

"His conduct throughout the whole operation was outstanding. His courage, leadership and devotion to duty were conspicuous and a good deal of the success of the operations was due to his personal effort."

*Lieutenant J. A. Varley, 2/19th Battalion.*

"During the engagements at Bakri and Parit Sulong, Lieutenant Varley commanded a platoon of "D" Company. His platoon was with the Transport when it was overwhelmed and with great determination succeeded in extricating his portion of the force and rejoined the battalion. In the subsequent engagement at Parit Sulong he exhibited conspicuous gallantry in the leadership of his platoon under constant and heavy enemy fire, showing complete disregard of personal safety."

## DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL

*Signalman Geoffrey John Watter Bingham, Signals.*

"Sigmn. Bingham was in charge of a wireless detachment of Signals that was allotted to an infantry brigade. When the brigade was overwhelmed, two A.I.F. battalions went forward to re-establish the situation. The detachment of Signals, led by Sigmn. Bingham, continued to serve the H.Q. of this small force, which was completely cut off by superior enemy forces for five days. No other means of inter-communication was available, and this detachment, led by Sigmn. Bingham, operated their set continuously under heavy fire and air attacks, thus enabling the Command to gain valuable information and to transmit orders and instructions.

"Hampered by considerable technical details and lack of equipment, this detachment managed to build up from the remains of various wireless sets in the area a composite set, with which they were able to maintain communication until the set was finally destroyed by enemy action. At one time the messages were being transmitted by a key improvised by joining two leads. During the whole of the period the detachment were continuously exposed to direct fire from the enemy, and it was only by the personal courage of Sigmn. Bingham, with one other remaining man of the detachment, that any form of communication was maintained."

## MILITARY MEDAL

*Sergeant W. G. Hunt, 2/19th Battalion.*

"During the engagements at Bakri and Parit Sulong, Sergeant Hunt commanded a platoon after his platoon commander had been wounded early in the engagement. He showed outstanding qualities of leadership and conspicuous gallantry throughout the engagements. His platoon in the final withdrawal was on the flank of the force used to extricate the remainder. As the final order to withdraw did not reach him he maintained his position until surrounded, then led his platoon out with the bayonet."

*Private A. A. Williams, Australian Army Medical Corps, 2/19th Battalion.*

"During the engagements of Bakri and Parit Sulong he continually carried out his duty of caring for the wounded under heavy artillery and rifle fire. On many occasions he went into occupied territory with a complete disregard for personal safety in order to bring in wounded.

"His conduct and courage were outstanding, and he performed duties far beyond those required of the ordinary stretcher bearer."

*Private M. W. V. Curnow, 2/19th Battalion.*

"During the engagements at Bakri and Parit Sulong this soldier, who is a member of the "I" Section attached

to a Company, showed conspicuous gallantry and great devotion to duty, continuously moving over his area, gaining invaluable information of enemy movements. He was often observed moving across ground swept by enemy fire to achieve his object."

*Signalman Maxwell Alfred Benoit, Signals.*

"Sigmn. Benoit was a member of a Signals wireless detachment which was allotted to an infantry brigade. When the brigade was overwhelmed, two battalions of the A.I.F. went forward to re-establish the situation. For a period of five days this detachment was continuously exposed to enemy fire and air attack and, although Benoit was three times wounded and suffering severely, he remained at his post and was instrumental in assisting the leader of his detachment in maintaining communication with Force Headquarters until the set was finally destroyed by enemy action."

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